

"The Sins of Men Not Chargeable to God"

Part 5

by

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***"Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God';
for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt any man."***

James 1:13

After taking so much time in setting forth the evidence of the doctrine in our text, it will be the easier task to apply them while answering the objections raised against it. These objections are drawn from either God's *decrees* or his *providence*; and the reasons that vindicate the latter do at the same time vindicate the former. Therefore, we need not linger long on vindicating the decrees of God, because it is obvious that if God does not actually tempt men by his providence in time, then he never decreed to do it from eternity.

The scriptures make, and all sound Christians believe, a difference between what God decreed to do himself and what he decreed to permit in others. And although his reasoning for both may be unknown, yet we are obliged by reason to believe they are not unjust. Not only the reasons of God's decrees but his decrees themselves are unknown until the event itself reveals them; and surely it is the wildest absurdity for men to allege that they are tempted by things of which they are utterly unaware. In his decrees God laid down measures for hindering innumerable sins, which would otherwise have happened were it not for the restraints of his providence and grace. So if his decrees should be considered at all, we should consider them as executed by his providence. Thus his decrees are not the cause of sin but the reason why there is not vastly more of it in the world than there is! It is by his decrees that the wickedness in the world is so much restrained, kept within definite bounds, and overruled for good ends.

Regarding the objections drawn from providence, the most noteworthy of them are perhaps these: (1) that it is God himself who has endowed his creation with that goodness and pleasure which inclines us to idolize it; (2) that he has implanted in us desires after these worldly objects, and yet has made laws contrary to those desires--as if we had laws to direct us one way and desires to direct us another; (3) that these tempting objects continue to be pleasant and delightful even when abused by wicked men in their pursuit or enjoyment of them; and (4) that we are placed in such circumstances that they surround us on all sides and make continual impression on our senses.

First Objection

We will consider now the first objection, that it is God who has made these objects (and made them so pleasant) which tempt us to sin (or more accurately, which we pervert into an occasion of sin). This is so far from being a just reflection on God or an excuse for us that it is the very reverse. It is this, in fact, which testifies to God's goodness--that he has given us so many good

creations to enjoy which are both useful and delightful, and which therefore should quicken us not to sin against him but to love and obey him. And this is the very thing that shows our inexcusable folly and ingratitude--that the very objects we prefer to God are his own creations, and the things for the sake of which we offend him his own gifts.

It is not the true worth and real goodness that God has put in his handiwork that is to be blamed for our preferring them to the Creator, but a false and imaginary worth we ourselves give them. It is lawful, yea, it is our duty to have a true esteem and value for God's works, for they are manifestations of his glory, fruits of his bounty. Sin does not consist in valuing them but in overvaluing them. The former shows a man's esteem of their Creator while the latter causes us to neglect him. If we loved the works of his hands only in proportion to their real worth, there would be no harm in it, and consequently no sin. On the contrary, it would be the perfection of our nature. But sin ruptures that proportion and causes man to imagine a kind of all-sufficiency or independence in God's creations. This is the most delusive imagination in the world, a deceptive illusion of our own, and it is the great cause of all our folly. God's works can neither be blamed nor made an excuse for it. All his works declare their own insufficiency with the clearest evidence; they direct us to their Author and acknowledge their absolute dependence upon him.

If men therefore are deceived in this matter, their error is wholly inexcusable because they imposed it upon themselves. Every practical error indeed is so, because it is voluntary. A man may be passive in believing the truth, for irresistible evidence may force his assent to it. But falsehood is incapable of such evidence. It is impossible that the devil or any external cause whatsoever can force an error on a creature endowed with reason. But there is something unique in this error which we are addressing; and that is, though a man should allege some small shadow of reason for other mistakes, he can allege none for preferring God's works to God himself; preferring the stream to the fountain, the shadow to the substance. Though there might be some color of excuse for preferring one creature to another, there surely can be none for preferring any creature to God.

If anything is self-evident, surely it is this: that God is our chief, yea indeed, our only true happiness. Failure to reflect upon this truth in no way excuses or extenuates a man's mistaken idea about it. It is true that man cannot examine all things, and therefore may be ignorant or mistaken about some without danger. But though he should neglect everything else, there is one pursuit he cannot excuse himself for neglecting, and that is to find wherein his chief happiness lies and the true path to it. And such a neglect is all the more inexcusable, because that search scarce requires any toil nor admits the least reason for hesitation, it being so obvious that only He who gave us life can give us happiness as well.

The first objection is enforced by asking the reasons for the goodness and pleasure in creation, which, though they do not excuse our sin, are yet the cause of making them into an occasion for sin. We are not fit to judge the reasons for God's actions, yet we may know enough in order to vindicate his holiness and extol his goodness. For what can be more agreeable to that divine perfection than that he, who is perfectly good himself, should have made his works all very good likewise, that the workmanship might be worthy of the workman, and that the effects might not disparage the cause?

Nothing can be more absurd than to allege that it would have been befitting to God's goodness had he created evil objects in order to prevent man's wickedness in idolizing the good. The brightest manifestations of God's glory have been made occasions of dishonoring him, it is true.

But surely none will say that it would have been better had they not been created lest they should be abused; that it would have been better had God's glory not been so displayed lest some should have made it an occasion of offending him; that it would have been better had men lacked those things which are truly the means and motives for adoring God lest some should recast them into occasions for despising him. The old heathens took occasion from the visible glory, beauty, and usefulness of the sun, moon, and stars to worship them. How absurd would it be to censure the Author of nature for endowing these creations with such beauty and usefulness simply because men corrupted their purpose. Many curious people have taken occasion from the regularity, order, and design of God's works to wholly employ themselves in amusing speculations and inquiries into nature without any regard to its Author. But surely that cannot in any way reflect upon God for forming his works with such regularity and harmony that the very contemplation of them gives delight.

Let us consider the inherent consequences if matters had been ordered otherwise; if instead of all that beauty and delight in God's handiwork they had been made unpleasant, deformed, and useless. The love and esteem of God is a principal part of his holiness, and would it have been a greater means or motive towards extolling the Author of these works if the works themselves were unworthy of it? What motive can there be for praising the cause when there is nothing deserving of praise in the effects?

Now, in considering the actions either of God or good men, it is important we distinguish between two very different sorts of consequences that may follow upon them. First, their true and proper effects for which they are designed and which they have an inherent tendency to produce. Second, those indirect consequences that may follow, not through any tendency in the good actions themselves to these evil consequences, but through the perverse dispositions of others. In this last sense, very bad consequences may follow upon the very best actions; but the latter can in no wise be blamed as the cause of the former.

When a good man is about to do an exemplary and useful action, he may foresee that some envious person will take occasion from it to engage in slander, backbiting or even worse, and that others will be just plain ungrateful for the good he does. But he cannot be blamed for that, nor ought he forego his duty in order to prevent their sins. No man is obliged to do evil or to forego what is absolutely good in order to prevent the evil of others. That would indeed be doing evil that good might come of it. And it is true, that man with a wicked disposition can use the best actions of another as an occasion for acting directly contrary to its nature, its inherent tendency, and its proper effects.

Let us apply these observations to the present case. The direct tendency of all the goodness and pleasure with which God has endowed the creation is to manifest his being and glorious perfections (particularly his goodness and all-sufficiency) and our absolute dependence on him. As a consequence, we will long for the enjoyment of God himself--the fountain--when we experience so much goodness even in the streams that flow from him. Accordingly, these same works of God from which wicked men take occasion to neglect him, are the means and motives of love, esteem, adoration, praise, and thanksgiving from saints and angels. They are the means and motives for reliance on him and union with him. Light is not more diametrically opposed to darkness than these inherent effects of God's works are to the unnatural evil uses that wicked men make of them. Evil men make the effects of his power occasions for despising him, the evidences of his all-sufficiency occasions of alienation. And, what is the most monstrous abuse imaginable, they make his benefits occasions of ingratitude, as has been already observed.

As stated before, the goodness and pleasure with which God has endowed the creation are means of preserving mankind. But there is a wise disposition in this that serves both to illustrate the doctrine and refute the objections. It is just because they are so useful that they are so pleasant. But it is likewise due to God's goodness that they are not more pleasant than they are, for there is danger in excess. Such excess tends not only to divert the thoughts but to alienate the mind from the higher goals to which these inferior blessings should lead us. In order to prevent such excess, it has been wisely ordained that these physical pleasures are neither too numerous, too powerful, nor durable.

It is otherwise with spiritual and intellectual enjoyments. These contribute directly to the perfection of our souls, whereas the former are but for the subsistence of our bodies. Intellectual enjoyments have something immortal in their nature, like the soul. But physical pleasures are fleeting, momentary; because however innocent in themselves, they are dangerous when indulged to excess. They can fill only a small part of life, and when idolized they decay by use and satiate by repetition. Things are so perfectly ordered by God that there is just enough pleasure in physical pleasures as may effectually stimulate men to use them, and so little as should hinder mankind from abusing them.

Second Objection

These same considerations serve also to refute the second objection that was mentioned, namely, that these objects which are the occasions of sin are not only made pleasant but necessary to us, and that desires after them are implanted in our nature. This objection carries its own answer. If these objects are necessary to us, then that in itself demonstrates the use of them to be lawful, and the legitimate and natural desire for them innocent. God has implanted only those desires necessary to man's duty--self preservation. However, men's wicked abuse corrupts them into occasions of ruin. Besides, it is obvious that God has so ordained matters that it requires very little to satisfy nature, and when that good end is obtained desire ceases. It is so, for instance, with hunger and thirst. After what is sufficient for health and nourishment has been taken, desire is satisfied. It is indeed otherwise, though, with those men who, being accustomed to excess, have contracted evil habits. But these habits are not natural but acquired, and we should distinguish between those inclinations implanted in us by God and those that are contracted by ourselves.

It may be asked, "Why are these objects made a necessity to man?" This question is as much out of place as to ask why the world was made or men made to inhabit it. The prophet Isaiah (45:18) seems to intimate that to have made the earth uninhabited would have been making it in vain:

For thus says Yahweh,
Who created the heavens,
Who is God,
Who formed the earth and made it,
Who has established it,
Who did not create it in vain,
Who formed it to be inhabited:
I am Yahweh, and there is no other.

It is hard to reckon the earth being properly inhabited if no creatures resided in it but pure spirits. Surely, then, it cannot reflect adversely on the Creator that he has made this lower world as it is--beautiful and glorious and not a desolate wilderness. And such inhabitants as mankind, consisting of body as well as spirit, could not subsist without being constantly provided with the means of life and nourishment. If it were not for that, the visible world would be comparatively useless. If it were no way subservient to the preservation and subsistence of its inhabitants, there would not be that beautiful connection that is now between the visible and invisible world, making things void of life and reason useful to men endowed with both. We may add that our inherent physical needs, when duly considered, are arguments for God's goodness, because in their proper use they are antidotes against sin and aids to spiritual duty. We become conscience of our own innate emptiness, God's all-sufficiency, and our dependence upon him,

In addition, human needs are an excellent anchor for society--for the many useful and beautiful relations comprehended within it. They lay a foundation for the exercise of innumerable virtues and graces, all of which may shine to the glory of God. And since man, created in God's image, is the most noble workmanship in the creation, it should not be thought improper that ample occasions should be provided for his light to shine in all its splendor--and all for the honor and glory of God. Were it not for men's inherent needs, they would be deprived of such excellent opportunities--opportunities to show their love to God by sacrificing pleasures to duty when they interfere; to show love to their neighbors by acts of charity, pity and compassion, bounty, generosity, and the like; and to demonstrate personal rectitude by temperance, sobriety, and other upright demeanor.

These physical needs also provide the foundation for the variety of stations and employments that deter men from idleness and inactivity. Men often allege that their labors are barriers to religious duties. But experience, generally speaking, shows that the man who has the most time on his hands does not make the best use of it. Eating his bread by the sweat of his brow is a punishment for man's sin, and at the same time an excellent restraint on it.

Thus it appears that God does not tempt us to sin but rather quickens us to duty by those desires implanted in us and those objects made necessary for us. And though they may be perverted by evil men, yet their natural bias is toward the exercise and triumph of grace and virtue. God's goodness is also evident in that he has not implanted desires for those things that are useless or hurtful. No superfluous desires are inherent; they are acquired by men themselves.

It is now easy to answer the objection about God's making laws against them. It is only against excess in them; and that excess is graciously forbidden by God because it does so much harm. It would do so whether he had forbidden it or not. Excessive love of earthly objects is the chief source of earthly trouble, and is in its nature not only hurtful to our souls and bodies but hurtful to others. It harms our souls by alienating them from our chief good and only happiness. It harms our bodies by the natural fruit of intemperance, anxiety, and excessive toil. And it does harm to our neighbors by tempting us to injustice, oppression and strife, and in spurning charity and beneficence.

It is the very nature of wisdom not to love any object above its real worth. This is what God's law requires of us, and surely nothing can be more necessary or reasonable. It is the way to that true enjoyment of his creation, both for the honor of God and our good.

Third Objection

The next objection is, that earthly objects remain pleasurable even when abused by sin. It is obvious it could not be otherwise, unless God should destroy the very nature of his own creation every time a wicked man abused it. God may have infinitely wise reasons for not overturning the laws by which nature is governed every time men violate them, for not breaking the perfect order of his own domain whenever men are guilty of disorder in theirs.

No doubt if we consider God's absolute power, he could, for example, turn the most wholesome food into poison when it is sinfully procured or enjoyed. But it is evident that such outward miracles would not prevent inward evil inclinations. They would not hinder any further that immoderate love of the world which has not already been restrained by other motives. But such outward miracles would indeed cripple the trial and exercise of grace and virtue, because it is the reasonable love of these objects that promote the glory of God and the good of men.

Fourth Objection

We now consider the last objection, that we are placed in such circumstances that these tempting objects surround us on all sides and continually excite our senses. This is true, but God has made all these objects very good. It is we ourselves who make them temptations to evil. Any truth in the objection may be expressed as follows: God has surrounded us with necessary and useful objects which not only display his glory but contribute to our maintenance. He has surrounded us on all sides with the fruits of his bounty and effects of his power. He has endowed us with suitable senses in order that we may see his glory in them all, and apply many to good use. They are motives for loving him, and materials for contemplating and adoring him.

No doubt heaven is an incomparably better place than this present world. But must we therefore censure God because he did not make the earth an utter wilderness? If we embraced the terms on which heaven is offered, surely our absence from it is not so long that we have reason to grumble. The time of our life of faith and state of trial is not so very tedious. Because we who love God yearn for higher realms and grow weary of earthly things, it is we who are the least in danger of neglecting the former or abusing the latter. All are obliged to consider that the true use and tendency of the one is to lead us up to the other. Because the invisible things of God may be clearly seen in all the visible creation, these invisible things sink deeper into our hearts; and for this very reason--because the manifestation of them makes continual impression on our senses.

Conclusion

We have considered several arguments that serve both to confirm our text and answer objections. And though this doctrine be plainly revealed in other parts of God's word as well, and though divine revelation obliges us to believe it, yet these considerations are useful because many who profess to believe the scriptures in general are troubled by it. Even those who love God the most may sometimes be perplexed with unbecoming thoughts of him; but they will pray and strive to avoid them. If the evidence given should prove insufficient to some, then consider that there may be perplexing objections raised even against demonstrable truths. Difficulties regarding this subject are owing to the darkness of our views of God's works, and to that intricacy of providence

which is perfectly consistent with the righteousness of them.

God's own testimony of his own holiness is an infallible evidence for the truth. No difficulties should hinder our assent to it. And the considerations adduced show that his works and actions agree with the testimony of his word, namely, *that as he cannot be tempted to evil, so neither tempts he any man*. This has been shown largely from the nature of God's works.

I shall only add a few observations taken from the nature of sin. (1) Sin is a forsaking of God. And it is manifest that he cannot tempt us to forsake him, unless he gives us ground to expect more happiness by forsaking him than by being united to him, which is impossible. Reason and experience as well as scripture show that it is an exceedingly evil and bitter thing to depart from the living God. (2) Sin is the transgression of his law. How then can he be thought to propose motives for us to disobey him? (3) Sin is a preference for his creation over him. How then can he be thought to put anything in the works of his hands that should make us hope for more good in the effect than in the cause?

The Spirit of God inculcates the words of our text upon us in order that we may adore God's spotless purity and loath ourselves for inexcusable wickedness. We can scarce consider sin in any light that more clearly shows its madness than in the reproach it brings upon God by preferring his creation to himself. Giving them that preference is not honoring them but rather a monstrous and unnatural abuse of them. Their beauty and glory consists in proclaiming that of their Creator, and this is the chief end and true use of them. They offer themselves as steps by which our thoughts may ascend to him. But when mankind fixes his chief happiness in them, then they are made occasions and pretenses for offending God, even though there is nothing in him or them to justify the neglect of the one or abuse of the other. When they are made instruments of rebellion against God, then that inanimate creation groans under the bondage of our corruption and toils in pain under the oppression of our vanity. They not only upbraid and reproach us for our ingratitude to God, but for our abuse of them and cruelty to ourselves.

If we kept our love of outward things within bounds, this would be that true mortification which God requires and for which the grace of Jesus Christ is offered to us. It is only superstition (particularly that of the Roman church) which commands men to abstain from things that God made to be received with thanksgiving. Now abstinence even from things in themselves lawful can, no doubt, be sometimes profitable. Yet these are the blessings least likely to be attained by those who practice excessive austerity. Let us observe that though Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, yet he did not refuse to join with men for their good in the use of the lawful comforts and necessities of life. This did indeed expose his spotless character to the censure of morose hypocrites (because he did not indulge in that useless austerity which they themselves valued so much), but it makes plain that spiritual comforts and temporal comforts are far from being inconsistent.

In regards to God's justice, some of the observations proposed might help convince many, through God's grace, of both the righteousness of future punishments and the certainty of them. *Wickedness* affronts God and abuses his creation. They who entirely neglect God here surely have no ground to expect that they will take delight in his presence hereafter. And as to the works of his hands, let men consider that in the next world God will be eternally multiplying those benefits which they so heinously abused in this.

Even supposing God should put no positive punishment on wicked men but only deprive them

forever of all his favors (which they abused), this would be enough to cause everlasting anguish and gloom. To be left to our own natural emptiness, to violent desires without any objects to satisfy them, to suffer the total loss of God and all his good creation--this not only is a loss appalling in itself, but so obviously the just demerit and inherent fruit of final impenitence that it is truly a wonder how wicked men can overcome the apprehension of it.

The principal use of our text is to aid us in a correct understanding of God's infinite mercy in the work of redemption. We will never have this without first being persuaded of his righteousness in the works of providence. As long as men blame God for their sins, they can never truly love him for his mercies--particularly for his greatest mercy, deliverance from sin and its attending miseries. On the other hand, to take upon ourselves all the blame for our sin and misery, while sincerely confessing that God is perfectly free from it, is the path to gratitude for his unspeakable gift--redemption through Jesus Christ.

Many who are prejudiced against revealed religion (the Bible) acknowledge that natural religion (reason and the study of nature) is very plain and rational. It is apparent that the objections raised against our text are difficulties of natural religion. Experience and reason teach us that an infinitely perfect God must be perfectly free both from the blame of our sin and the misery attending it. Experience and reason show us that we are sinners deserving punishment. But it is only revealed religion--the gospel--that give us the remedy.

If we kept our love for worldly objects in balance, they would no longer be our enemies but our friends. All the pleasures in those streams would make us love the fountain. All the troubles connected with them would make us long for God, and for that blessed state where there is no need of temperance because there is no possibility of excess; where desire will not be checked, nor enjoyment restrained; where our joys will have none of that alloy that cleaves to them here; where our honor will not engender envy; where our friendships will be without strife, our riches without anxiety, our pleasures without discontent. And, which crowns all, where all will be without end.

This is part five of Sermon I in *Sermons and Essays: by the Late Rev. Mr. John M'Laurin*, published from his manuscripts by John Gillies (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1811). **Note:** The text has been paraphrased for easier reading and clarity.